

Soviet Nuclear-Arms Security Is Source Of Growing Concern, CIA Chief Says

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WASHINGTON—The U.S. and Soviet governments are growing more concerned about the security of Soviet nuclear weapons amid the turmoil sweeping the Soviet Union, retiring U.S. intelligence chief William Webster said.

Mr. Webster, who is leaving his post as director of central intelligence, noted that both governments have long been confident that the Soviet strategic missiles and warheads aimed at the U.S. are under "ironclad" control and couldn't be fired accidentally, even if rebellions break out.

But, he told reporters, "what I think we're seeing now is some concern on the part of the [Soviet] central government." He said the U.S. has learned that the Soviets have started "looking at what they need to do to be sure that the missiles do not fall into unfriendly hands, that they are moved if necessary, that the systems that they have in place to prevent someone from engaging in unauthorized fire are intact and protected."

He offered no further details, but said the new Soviet concern "of course lowers the level of our confidence." In the past, the U.S. has brushed off concern about missiles based in rebellious republics by asserting that Moscow maintains strong and overlapping controls over the weapons.

Concern Over Control

Mr. Webster cautioned that security hasn't broken down yet, but he added that "this is one [issue] that we will have to pay a lot of attention to as the [Soviet] central government loses its control on the ground."

The Central Intelligence Agency boss also predicted that some Soviet Republics will win independence, possibly this year,

thus starting the breakup of the U.S.S.R. And he declared that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's own political survival is "increasingly uncertain."

On another matter, Mr. Webster hinted strongly that investigators probing the 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 now believe that the Libyans suspected of placing the bomb on the plane weren't acting in conjunction with a Syrian-based terrorist band long thought to have masterminded the mass killing. Instead, he suggested, each group was working on its own separate plan to blow up a plane, and the Syrian-based group failed while the Libyans succeeded.

"There were several of these activities taking place all about the same time, with different players," he said. "There were lots of players, not necessarily coordinated." Some efforts were aborted by arrests and other factors, he added. Members of the Syrian-based terror band, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, were arrested in Germany two months before the blast, but it had been assumed the group was still behind the bombing.

Warming to Syria?

Any official conclusion that the Libyan activities weren't coordinated with the Syrian group are likely to revive charges that the administration is deliberately playing down Syria's role in order to seek better relations with Damascus. But Mr. Webster, a former federal judge, emphatically denied that charge.

"That is simply not true," he said. "Nobody has ever tried to say ... 'Let's change the spin on it.'"

He also said he was cautiously optimistic that the Western hostages held in Lebanon might soon be released in a mass prisoner exchange with Israel, as Iranian and Shiite leaders have hinted. But he cautioned that such hopes have been dashed before.

President Bush has nominated Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates to succeed Mr. Webster. The exact date of Mr. Webster's departure from the post isn't known.

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